

The Lithuanian Yeshivas of Eastern Europe in the Interwar Period

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Among the unique characteristics of the Lithuanian Jewry, its constant striving for learning and scholarship was the one that was prominently highlighted in the literature. It seems that the Lithuanian yeshivas expressed this special characteristic most. From the middle of the 19th century, they were places of learning for the sake of learning with no other purpose. These yeshivas were affected quite well of the changes that the Jews under the Russian Empire underwent as a result of economic and social influences – beginning with the reforms under Czar Alexander the Second in the middle of the 19th century and through the Zionist and Bundist Revolutionary actions at the beginning of the 20th century. At the end of this long period the yeshivas' situation stabilized and a period of flourishing and renewal commenced. This is when my research about the Eastern European Lithuanian yeshivas between the two world wars began.

This research identifies a sharp drop of the renewal trend at the start of WWI and a severe weakening of the financial stability and the size of these institutions. Those that managed to survive the first stages of the war had to relocate, along with hundreds of thousands of displaced Jews, to Russia and the Ukraine. Even there they experienced a long series of wanderings and the difficulties of the era. However, most managed to stay open as institutes of learning while in exile and only after the war were they able to return to their original homes, which were no longer under the rule of Czarist Russia. Here they fell under great geo-political transformations: the minority was under the authority of Independent Lithuania and the vast majority in the eastern border regions of the Polish Republic. No matter their physical location, they all carried on the same unique learning tradition as that from before the war, and therefore, continued to carry the name “Lithuanian Yeshivas”; this was a symbol of their tradition rather than their geographic location.

My research that follows the Lithuanian yeshivas in Independent Lithuania and in the Polish Republic, examines the effort they made to rejuvenate after the war and illustrates their fascinating spread into central Poland and even into the Hassidic area of Vohlin. This exploration illuminates the impressive growth of many of them in the face of rising secularization on the one hand, and massive financial difficulties on the other, of which they suffered from the beginning of the 1920's. It should be pointed out, that some percentage of the growth came from foreign students, American and German, for the most part, who had come to continue their learning in the Lithuanian yeshivas in order to receive rabbinic ordination. The study looks at other aspects of the Lithuanian yeshivas as well; organizational, economic, educational and social, as well as their flight from Poland during World War II when they crowded into Vilna, and then to the smaller towns in Lithuania. It is somehow symbolic that in their last year of existence they found their way back to “living under the same roof”, where sadly, they also came to the same bitter end.